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Andrej Babis seen with wife Monika Babisova during his victory speech

CZECH REPUBLIC 2017. THE WINNERS WERE THE ANTI-ESTABLISHMENT PARTIES

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The legislative elections in the Czech Republic were held in October 20-21, 2017. There were 200 members of the Chamber of Deputies elected, and the turnout was 60,84 % (four years ago 59,48 %). The nine parties that made a way to the Parliament were; ANO 2011 (ANO); Christian and Democratic Union (KDU–ČSL); Civic Democratic Party (ODS); Communist Party of Bohemia and Moravia (KSČM); Czech Pirate Party (Pirátská strana); Czech Social Democratic Party (ČSSD); Freedom and Direct Democracy (SPD); Mayors and Independents (STAN); and TOP 09. That so many parties passed the election threshold is indeed the most fragmented result in the history of the Czech Republic.

Prior to the October elections the two largest parties in the country were the Czech Social Democratic Party (ČSSD) and ANO. The largest opposition parties were the Communist Party, the TOP 09 and the Civic Democratic Party (ODS). The polls showed ANO to clearly be the winner of the elections. The biggest difference between the polls and the election result is the loss of the Social Democrats. The party was expected to gain about 12 % of the votes, or in the best case scenario, even 14 % of the votes – yet it did reach only 7 % and thus did not surpass the ten percent election threshold. Before the elections there were speculations that part of the Social Democrats traditional supporters could instead vote for ANO. Most of the supporters of ANO are people in their mid-sixties and without academic degree. It seems like this came true.

The clear winner was – as had been predicted – the ANO movement (29,64%). The other two major winners of the elections were the Pirate Party and the extreme right-wing SPD, that both for the first time ever surpassed the ten percent election threshold and made their way to the parliament. The biggest winners of the elections were thus the Anti-Establishment Parties and their candidates.

The conservative ODS gained most votes (11,32%) among the more traditional parties and came second in the final election results. The other traditional parties such as the Social Democrats which has until now been the party in power of the country gained only 7,27% of the votes. The Communist Party faced its worst result since the Velvet Revolution in 1989 by receiving only 7,76% of the votes, performing however slightly better than the Social Democrats.

The election campaigns were launched in the Spring and Summer of 2017. The most visible themes of the campaigns were critical views towards the European Union and Euro Zone, terrorism and immigration. These themes were mostly brought up by ANO, SPD and Communists, but also by individual candidates of several other parties. The SPD openly promoted a national referendum for leaving the EU. The chairman of the ANO movement Andrej Babiš published a list of promises to the citizens and at the end of the campaign he sent a letter titled “a Contract of Andrej Babiš with the Czech people” directly to the homes of Czech people.

The ODS promised lower taxes and a refusal to adopt the Euro as a national currency as well as the rejection of immigration quotas dictated by the European Union. The Pirate Party focused on tax reforms, freedom of information flow and on changes to government administration. The STAN mainly focused on local and municipal level issues. The Social Democrats emphasized the need to raise salaries and to improve social welfare system whereas the Christian Democrats focused on family and children. The only throughout pro-European Party TOP 09 only barely made its way to the Parliament.

The success of the populist parties will need a thorough analyses. The Czech Republic is doing well on the European scale. In many respects, the country has benefited from membership of the European Union, the economy has been growing steadily, and unemployment rate is low. Yet many local commentators on politics have noted that people do not trust in politics and feel frustrated. There are real concerns: the public sector salaries are not competitive compared to many other countries in the EU and there are many social and economic problems affecting the everyday life of the citizens. The corruption has again increased in the recent years. However, among the most discussed themes during the election campaign were immigration and Islamic terrorism even though there are only a few Muslims in the country and only a handful of immigrants (12) were accepted to the country as a result of the refugee crises of 2015. Overall, emphasizing different kind of worst-case scenarios and security threats played a significant role in campaigns of almost all parties.

Moreover , the leader of the ANO movement and the most probably next Czech Prime Minister Babiš is currently facing fraud charges in a case involving the misuse of EU subsidy a decade ago. However, this did not prevent almost 50 000 people to cast their votes to him. Andrej Babiš is the second richest man in the Czech Republic, he owns a significant share of the local media and business. Two of the Czechs' important daily newspapers, Mladá Fronta Dnes and Lidové Noviny, are currently owned by publishing house that belongs to Babiš.

The other winners of the election are SPD led by the Japanese-Korean-Czech Tomeo Okamura and the Pirate Party led by Ivan Bartoš. SPD is an openly anti-immigrant and Euro-sceptic political party. In one of his Facebook post, the leader of the party Okamura suggested that the citizens of his country should "protect a democratic way of life and protect the heritage of our ancestors from Islam." He also encouraged people to walk their dogs and pigs in neighborhoods with Muslim population and boycott "Muslim food". SPD was supported by the French populist politician Marine Le Pen. In the Czech Republic, the smaller protest parties have been supported by men more than women.

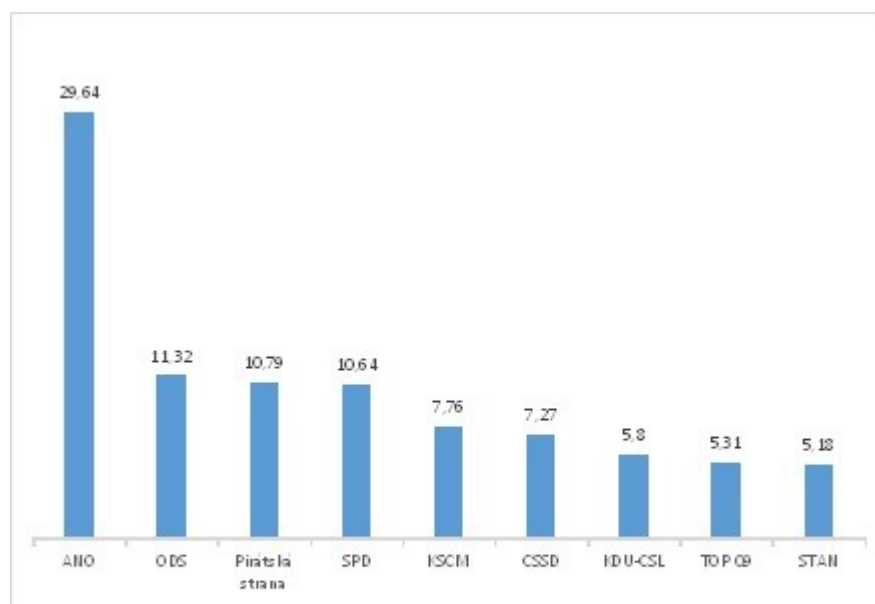
What does the election result mean for the future of the country and how will the situation in the Czech Republic look after the elections? The Czechs have different views on the issue: some see the Czech Republic now clearly heading towards the model of Eastern European oligarchy; others believe that the Czech constitution protects the country from immediate major changes. Many politicians see the electoral victory of Babiš as a real threat to liberal democracy. His authoritarian way of managing, his vast ownerships in the business sector, and influence on social control are worrying.

Some of the parties (including ODS, KDU-ČSL, Pirátská Strana) had announced prior to elections that they are not willing to join the

government with the ANO Party due to Babiš being charged. It seems that only Okamura's SPD and Communists would be ready for cooperation with ANO. As a result, the negotiations for forming the government are expected to be tricky.

After the election Babiš announced that he will not want a government of three parties such as the one still in power because it would be a "waste of time". He stated that his ANO is closest to the ODS, STAN and the Pirates but does not exclude the possibility to form the government with any of the eight parties elected to the parliament.

According to local estimates, the result of the elections forces pro-European thinking in Czech Republic into the opposition. Several local reporters are worried of the future of liberal democracy in the hands of an oligarch anti-establishment prime minister.



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